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ABSTRACT

This study examined the degree to which religion is perceived as a source of stress and as a coping resource among Jewish students. Subjects, 75 sixth- through eighth-grade students in a Midwestern city, completed a survey in Sunday school. Twenty of the students also responded to a structured interview about their stressors and coping strategies. The mean age was 12.60 years with 56 percent of the sample being males. Forty-eight percent attended a Reform, 31 percent a Conservative, and 21 percent an Orthodox synagogue. Over 50 percent of the sample reported having experienced a variety of religious stressors in the past year, such as being restricted from activities due to the Sabbath or experiencing anti-Semitic comments. In responding to the Brief Religious Coping Strategies Scale for Jewish Children, developed for this study, students endorsed a variety of religious coping strategies from each of three factors: (1) seeking God's direction/support; (2) seeking cultural/social support; and (3) spiritual struggle. Religious stressors and coping strategies were positively related to several measures of Jewish identity. (Author/KB)

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Religion as a Source of Stress, Coping, and Identity Among Jewish Adolescents

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This research was presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Albuquerque, New Mexico, April 15, 1999. Further information can be obtained from Eric F. Dubow at the Department of Psychology, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 43403.

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Abstract

This study examined the degree to which religion is perceived as a source of stress and as a coping resource among 6th – 8th grade Jewish students (N = 75). Over 50% of the sample reported having experienced a variety of religious stressors in the past year (e.g., being restricted from activities due to the Sabbath, experiencing anti-Semitic comments). In responding to the Brief Religious Coping Strategies Scale for Jewish Children (developed for this study), students endorsed a variety of religious coping strategies from each of the three factors: Seeking God's direction/support; Seeking cultural/social support; and Spiritual struggle. Religious stressors and coping strategies were positively related to several measures of Jewish identity.

Introduction

Religion is an important element of identity formation as early adolescents negotiate changes in social, cognitive, and physical development (e.g., Blos, 1962; Fowler, 1991). Research with adults indicates that religion can be a stressor as well as a coping resource (Pargament, 1997), but few studies have examined religious coping among children, especially in Jewish samples.

Jewish adolescents face a variety of potential stressors. For example, the religiously symbolic transition from childhood to adulthood that is marked by the Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony can be anxiety provoking. Regarding peer stressors, Jewish adolescents must often assimilate into Christian/secular peer groups (Zlatin, 1982) and may feel that the observance of practices of Judaism interferes with peer-related activities (Rubin, 1994). In addition, Jewish adolescents are likely to face anti-Semitism (Bershtel, 1992).

At the same time, religious beliefs and practices can be coping resources. For example, studies indicate an inverse relationship between religiousness and certain forms of delinquent behavior (e.g., Donahue & Benson, 1995). Religion may offer a spiritual context for understanding life's challenges among ethnic minority groups (Gonzales & Kim, 1997). Thus, we expected religion to be both a coping resource and a source of stress for Jewish adolescents.

Method

Participants and Procedures

- 75 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students in a Midwestern city completed a survey in Sunday school; 20 also responded to a structured interview about their stressors and coping strategies
- 56% male; mean age = 12.60 (SD = .95)
- 48% attended a Reform, 31% a Conservative, and 21% an Orthodox synagogue

- The children indicated moderate levels of Jewish identity/involvement

Survey Measures

Jewish stressors. Based on interviews with rabbis and religious educators, and a review of the adult religious coping literature, we created a list of 16 stressors (see Table 1).

Coping strategies: Religious Coping Strategies Scale for Children (Brief RCOPE- Jewish children). Based on interviews with rabbis and religious educators, and a review of the Brief RCOPE (Pargament et al., in press), we chose 17 items representing both positive (e.g., benevolent religious appraisal) and negative coping strategies (e.g., punishing God reappraisal) (see Table 2).

Open-ended vignettes. Children responded to two vignettes that described stressful situations (one religious—facing anti-Semitic comments; one secular—peer conflict). The religious stressor responses were coded along seven categories: verbal challenge (e.g., curse at them), physical challenge (e.g., push), avoidance (e.g., walk away), ignoring, assertive confrontation (e.g., "tell them that religion has nothing to do with it"), appealing to authority (e.g., "tell the teacher"), and other. Six categories were developed for the secular responses: apologize, appease (e.g., "spend extra time with friend"), appeal to authority (e.g., "tell parents"), move on (e.g., "if person doesn't accept apology, it's too bad"), and other.

Religious identity variables. 1) Jewish values. The "Jewish Values Grid" (Zlatin, 1982) includes items such as wearing Jewish symbols and observing the Sabbath. 2) Multigroup Ethnic Identity Scale (Phinney, 1992). We slightly revised this measure to include 19 items targeted specifically towards Judaism (e.g., "I am happy that I am Jewish"; "I think a lot about how Judaism will be a part of my future"). 3) We included three items typically used to assess religious identity

and involvement: importance of religion, frequency of synagogue attendance, and frequency of prayer.

Individual structured interview. The students identified 3 secular and 3 religious-related stressors they experienced in the past year, and listed religious and non-religious coping strategies they used in response to these stressors.

Results

Religious stressors

- Students reported experiencing a wide range of religious stressors within the past year (Table 1); 9 stressors were experienced by more than 1/3 of the sample (e.g., facing anti-Semitic comments; dietary restrictions)
- Structured interviews yielded 3 additional stressors: "having to explain to non-Jewish peers about the Jewish religion"; "having to convert because one parent was not Jewish"; "thinking about the Holocaust"

Religious coping

- Principal components analysis using varimax rotation revealed a 3-factor solution for our measure of religious coping strategies, accounting for 58% of variance: Factor 1, seeking God's direction and support; Factor 2, seeking Jewish cultural and social support; and Factor 3, expressions of spiritual struggle. The frequencies of use of each strategy are shown in Table 2
- Interviews yielded two other religious coping strategies: thinking about God and simply accepting one's religion
- Students generated a variety of coping strategies in response to open-ended hypothetical stressor vignettes, but religious coping strategies were generally not mentioned. In response

to the religious stressor vignette (anti-Semitic comments by a peer), over 50% of students stated they would use some form of verbal challenge (e.g., insulting the peer)

Religious stressors/coping and Jewish identity

- The experience of religious stressors was modestly associated with ethnic identity and Jewish values, suggesting that increased feelings of connectedness to religion and culture may heighten the salience of these stressors for students (Table 3)
- The religious coping subscales correlated moderately to strongly with measures of Jewish identity, implying that positive connectedness to one's religion is associated with the use of religious coping strategies perceived to be helpful in stressful situations (Table 3)
- The religious coping subscales also correlated modestly with the experience of Jewish stressors, consistent with the idea that dealing with religious stressors may mobilize religious coping resources (Table 3)

Conclusions / Implications

Religion as a source of stress

- Two themes emerged from the stressors endorsed by students: 1) the ongoing tension between cultural assimilation and the maintenance of Jewish tradition (e.g., Sabbath observance preventing other activity); and 2) the tension related to religious minority status in a predominantly Christian society (e.g., hearing anti-Semitic comments)

Religion as a source of coping

- The 3-factor solution of our religious coping scale differed from prior research with Christian samples where only two factors have generally been obtained (i.e., positive and negative coping; cf. Pargament, 1997). The seeking cultural/social support factor may speak

to a unique component of Jewish identity: the juxtaposition of religious (e.g., beliefs and practices) and sociocultural (e.g., family customs) components

Religion and development

- Researchers, educators, and clinicians should be aware of the impact religion can have on the developmental tasks of this difficult period. The emergence of greater abstract thinking abilities likely enhances adolescents' capacity for understanding the role of religious beliefs and practices in their lives
- Our findings are consistent with the notion of "stress mobilization," where stressors elicit attempts to select the most appropriate coping strategies. An emphasis in Jewish education (e.g., in Hebrew day schools and religious schools) on the ways in which Judaism can help adolescents cope with everyday and religious stressors may make Jewish coping resources more salient and available
- Given prior research linking religiosity with decreased problem behavior in adolescents (e.g., Donahue & Benson, 1995), the role played by religious coping in enhancing adolescent adjustment should be further explored

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Table 1

Percentage of Jewish Middle School Students (N = 75) Who Experienced Religious Stressors Within the Past Year

Religious stressor	% who experienced the stressor
5. I wondered how important it really was to go to Hebrew or Sunday school	87%
6. Because of Shabbat or another Jewish holiday, I couldn't do something I wanted to do	79%
2. I was worried about my Bar/Bat Mitzvah	58%
1. Other kids made anti-Semitic comments about me	51%
4. I wondered how "Jewish" I really wanted to be	45%
12. I worried about other people treating me badly because I am Jewish	43%
14. Something I learned about Judaism upset me	41%
3. I couldn't eat something I wanted because it wasn't kosher	39%
13. I felt uncomfortable being Jewish during Christian holidays	35%
16. I wondered if it's OK to date someone who is not Jewish	31%
11. I argued with my parents about whether to continue my Jewish studies after my Bar/Bat Mitzvah	25%
15. I had an argument with a friend about religion	24%
10. I argued with my parents about how religious I should be	20%
7. I felt uncomfortable with friends because I am Jewish	17%
9. Someone treated me badly in the synagogue	9%
8. My parents argued with each other about religion	4%

Table 2

Brief Religious Coping Strategies Scale for Children-Jewish: Highest Factor Loadings and Frequency of Responses for Each Item

Item	Factor loadings			% Responding	
	I	II	III	Never/ Hardly ever	Most of the time/ Always
Seeking God's Direction/Support (α = .88)					
I ask God to forgive me for the things I did wrong.	.86			25%	43%
I ask God to help me do what I need to do.	.83			51%	21%
I ask God to help me not be so upset.	.78			63%	24%
I pray for God's love and care.	.76			39%	27%
I try to see how God may be trying to teach me something.	.65			54%	19%
I pray to stop worrying.	.65			72%	7%
I let God take care of the problems for me.	.65			87%	0%
Seeking Cultural/Social Support (α = .74)					
I look forward to Shabbat.		.76		56%	19%
I think about what Judaism has to say about how to handle the problems.		.73		61%	8%
I talk to my rabbi.		.67		80%	5%
I talk to or spend time with my Jewish friends.		.62		23%	41%
I try to do Mitzvot (good deeds).[a]	.47	.46		12%	51%
Spiritual Struggle (α = .72)					
I start to wonder whether God can really do everything.			.79	53%	12%
I wonder if God cares about me.[a]	.42		.73	62%	15%
I wonder what I did for God to punish me.[a]	.49		.50	58%	16%
I ask God why this had to happen.[a]	.64		.50	48%	17%
I get mad at God.			.34	92%	0

Note. Children responded to each item on a 5-point scale ("never" to "always") to the lead statement, "When I have stressful problems...." These results were obtained using a principal components analysis with a varimax rotation (N = 74). Highest loadings and all loadings >.40 are included.

[a]These items had moderate to high cross-factor loadings but were still included on the specified factor for conceptual purposes given the preliminary nature of scale development.

Table 3

Correlations Among Religious Stressors, Coping Strategies, and Identity Variables

		Religious coping subscales			Religious identity variables			
	Religious Stressors	Seeking God's direction	Cultural support	Spiritual struggle	Values	Ethnic identity	Freq. of attend.	Freq. of prayer
Religious coping subscales								
Seeking God's direction	.22+							
Cultural/social support	.30*	.40**						
Spiritual struggle	.27*	.56**	.21+					
Religious identity variables								
Jewish values								
Ethnic identity	.32**	.47**	.56**	.25*				
	.21+	.44**	.63**	.02	.68**			
Freq. of attendance	.15	.09	.16	.09	.30**	.24*		
Freq. of prayer	.14	.33**	.09	.23*	.23*	.29*	.22+	
Importance of religion	.01	.39**	.38**	.11	.60**	.67**	.22+	.22+

** p < .01. * p < .05. + p < .10